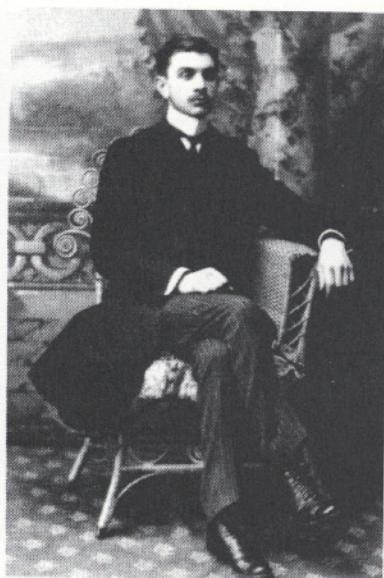
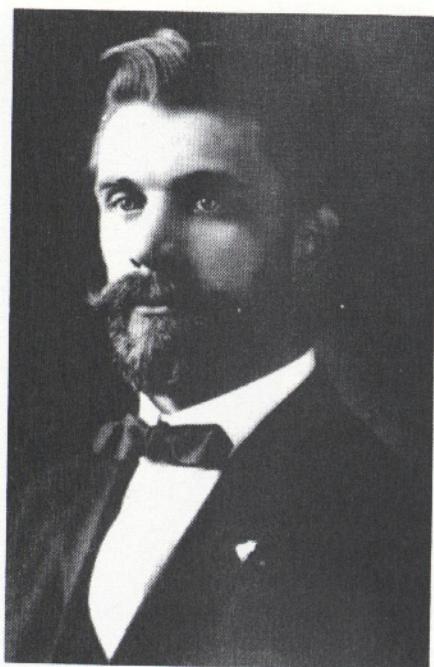


Bartlett Joshua Palmer (1882-1961): the early years. Above and below center: B. J. had just grown his beard when he assumed control of the Palmer Institute and Chiropractic Infirmary in 1904.



As president of the Palmer School of Chiropractic in its growth years (left and right), B. J. saw enrollment go from a few dozen in 1906 to over 3,000 in 1921. Controversial and colorful, his ideas are still at the focal point of much of the internal dissent within the profession. (Above right) The representation of this B. J. as the center of the Chiropractic universe was circa 1912.

Assessing the Oracle at the Fountain Head: B.J. Palmer and His Times, 1902-1961

RUSSELL W. GIBBONS*

Bartlett Joshua Palmer was the last of the first 15 "disciples" of his father, The Founder, and the only one of those pioneer graduates who achieved a lasting impact. Within four years he would be the self-proclaimed "Developer" of the profession and the equally anointed successor to professional leadership. While he dominated the colorful chiropractic landscape for better than half of this century, his uncontested philosophical and political role lasted less than 18 years. While neo-"straight" schools and political factions have invoked his teachings in recent years, there has yet to be an objective reconciliation of B.J. Palmer's myriad complexities—his genius, his bold entrepreneurship, his energy coupled with his disdain for science, his intolerance to opposition and his attraction to cultism. A quarter of a century after his death his legacy is still being debated, but his impact upon chiropractic remains as the greatest single individual influence during the history of this alternative health provider group.

The first six decades of chiropractic have been variously described as tumultuous, controversial and flamboyant. And much of that description may be accorded to the one dominant personality who filled the landscape of the profession in that same time period, that of Bartlett Joshua Palmer.

Indeed, there are those who have contended that without his presence, the course and even the survival of chiropractic as a separate, alternative health profession would have been doubtful. Wardwell, recognized as the leading medical sociologist of the profession, declared in 1978 that "without B.J. Palmer, chiropractic would almost certainly not have survived as a 'separate and distinct' profession."¹

Chiropractic's many detractors throughout this century found in B.J. Palmer an obvious target for their charges of health fraud, quackery and medical pretension. Through condemnation of "B.J." all of chiropractic was seemingly indicted in allegations of charlatanism.

That B.J. had charismatic qualities is not in dispute. His devoted followers, admirers and enemies alike agreed to his powers of persuasion, his ability to communicate and a seemingly boundless energy. How he was recalled depended upon those who came into contact with him, or who were to shape their professional lives based upon his writings and ideology. The extremes between devotion and contempt was marked.

To Marcus Bach, an educator and man of letters, the junior Palmer had achieved for chiropractic "... what no one else could have done... at a time when courage, faith, showman-

ship and conviction to a point of radicalism were necessary."² Yet within the first decade of his role as a schoolman and leader of the upstart practitioners, the Illinois *Medical Journal* would describe B.J. as "... the most dangerous man in Iowa out of a prison cell. (He) is insane, a paranoiac, a man whose irresponsibility is criminal."³

It may be an understatement to observe that while it is quickly apparent that the opinions, writings, influence and impact of B.J. Palmer have blanketed the history and evolution of chiropractic, few objective studies have explored the inner workings of its "Developer." While chiropractors and their sympathizers have devoted hundreds of thousands of words to the philosophy of the profession, and an explanation of the "Innate" that supposedly propelled his every action, few have ventured into the unexplored area of his early years, his maturation and the crucible of events that shaped B.J. Palmer.

Any man who still evokes passionate feelings a quarter of a century after his death, and who is still looked upon by opposing factions of the profession from diametrically conflicting polar points of adulation or defamation—deserves the full searchlight of historical study.

Born in What Cheer, Iowa in 1882, B.J. was the only son of the Founder of Chiropractic, Daniel David Palmer and of his second wife, Louvenia Landers, described as a "woman of culture and tenderness". According to Gielow, the name on the birth certificate signed by a regular practitioner was Joshua Bartlett.⁴ It would be the first of many inconsistencies and contradictions in the 79 years that he would reside in Iowa and travel much of the face of the known world.

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For better than half of this century, B.J. was the center of much of the solar system of chiropractic, yet for the last 37 years of his life he was a setting sun in a profession founded by his father and largely developed by himself. He would become a prophet scorned, relegated to a philosophical Mecca that could no longer command annual pilgrimages of unquestioning followers.

Wardwell quotes a Harvard University medical professor who visited the Palmer School in the 1940s and later advocated licensure in Massachusetts, one of the last of the medical bastions to resist a chiropractic licensing board. "Of the three geniuses he had met in his life," he declared, "B.J. Palmer was one."⁵ As those who encountered B.J. in his lifetime would attest to, The Developer would have been in full agreement!

Said his friend and fellow philosopher, Bach: "He was by no means infallible. B.J. would have been the first to admit it, but he certainly wanted no one to admit it for him or to remind him that he ought to admit it himself."⁶

The Palmer Ego may have been but an extension of the Palmer Innate, to which B.J. attributed all of his decisions, statements, lectures and writings. Innate, to B.J., was infallible. No incisive probing into the origins and early evolution of chiropractic would be complete without a full examination of the development of B.J. Palmer, from that twilight period of the turn of the new Twentieth Century to the end of its first decade.

It is an amazing story. For B.J., by his own autobiographical account and those of his close associates, came literally from rags to riches. He did not have a good home life, for while Daniel David Palmer may have been a Discoverer and a pioneer of alternative health care, he was by some accounts a difficult husband and a poor father.

Consider this candid revelation of B.J.'s early life by his lifelong friend and associate, Herbert Hender:

He was born into a family. . . with little wealth. His mother died when he was one and a half years old. From then on, he was at the mercy of three cruel stepmothers, each worse than the one before. The first 20 years of B.J.'s life were spent in being educated to hate people and everything they did. He was often forced to sleep in dry-goods boxes in alleys, sometimes with the weather below zero. . .⁷

From a wretched life as a teenager expelled from high school and banished from home whenever the capricious actions of his father dictated, B.J. would on several occasions sleep on the wharves of Davenport's riverfront, earning a sustenance at the city's largest department store.

By 1910 B.J. was a man of property, owner of one of the finest mansions on the top of Brady Street hill. He was the president of an institution with more than 300 students, called himself a doctor and was already an editor and an author. He had married the daughter of a respected family, wore a

Van Dyke beard and dressed in a fitting role for a leader of a professional body, a scholar and an academic.

To understand B.J. Palmer and His Times, and to know how and why he arrived at his pinnacle of influence, the years 1900 to 1910 become important. This decade, like so many other periods of early chiropractic, has been virtually a period of "lost years."

Because he occupied center stage in the chiropractic story for virtually all but a few years of its first six decades—from his assumption of the presidency of the Palmer School in 1906 until his death in 1961—it becomes a legitimate and even necessary historical and sociological quest to explore fully the activities and movements of B.J. and his father in those formative years at the turn of the century.

Thousands of words have been written about both Palmers, the vast majority of them about the son. The detractors—medical, chiropractic and lay—have published works of various merit, usually supporting a preconceived judgment. The supportive volumes and articles had little objectivity, and most can be relegated to instances of unashamed puffery.

One of the enigmas in the larger riddle of Bartlett Joshua Palmer, in fact, may be the absence of any true biographical portrait of one of the more fascinating figures in the first half of the Twentieth Century. In fact, the only in-depth interview and study of B.J. and his early years comes not from a recognized author or biographer, but instead from the research of a New York lawyer by the name of Cyrus Lerner.

Lerner was a well-respected attorney who had at one time been personal counsel to the late Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, the father of the President and the founder of that family political tradition that to many has been a unique American "royal family." He was then, well-connected, sophisticated and deliberate in his conclusions. And as a chiropractic patient, he entered the world of its murky history and passionate politics in the early 1950s.

The writer was advised of the Lerner Report on the History of Chiropractic by the late Clarence Weiant some ten years ago. It is a massive typescript, well organized in eight volumes of 780 pages. If it were published in book form with appropriate notations and indexing, it would be a volume of at least 300 pages.

The status of the Lerner Report was, like its subject, something of an enigma. The preface to the manuscript stresses that it is the property of the Foundation for Health Research, a New York not-for-profit corporation apparently set up by Lerner. The incorporators were some prominent chiropractors who had commissioned Lerner to interview B.J., document the early history of the profession and travel to Davenport and Florida for the purpose of conducting extensive interviews with B.J. and his associates. Several reels of interviews were appended as part of the original Report, but their whereabouts is unknown.⁸

In addition to Weiant, who at that time was dean of the Chiropractic Institute of New York and the first chiropractor to become a graduate anthropologist, the others who commissioned the Lerner Report included Albert Werner, founder and head of the pro-B.J. American Bureau of Chiropractic; Clarence N. Flick, who was the legislative head of the ABC in New York and Lyndon H. Lee, a longtime leader of the profession in New York. All were Palmer graduates, but Lee was the only one who had engaged in controversy with B.J. over philosophical and political issues within the profession.

In the sometimes rambling, Socratically constructed manuscript, Lerner recalls his 1952 interviews with B.J., and says that he sought "to find out how his mind operated."⁹ He encountered difficulty in a direct line of questioning, and the frustrations of having B.J. refer the interviewer to his lectures and books on given subjects. Lerner summarized his apprehension:

Here was a man at the top of his profession; regarded as a leader, as a teacher, as a scholar, as an impressive public speaker; as an author and as a writer of many books; as a lecturer; as a 'philosopher of Chiropractic'; as the developer; as a man who has appeared in courts all over the country for many years as an expert witness; who has been headmaster of the oldest school of chiropractic in the world; who has appeared on the platform to lecture before hosts of audiences. Why, I asked myself, would it be necessary for this man to be lost for words, to talk to me easily and freely and exchange views with me?¹⁰

Lerner cites two examples of seeking additional personal testimony from B.J. regarding pre-1920 incidents that have evoked controversy—his alleged imprisonment in Stillwater, Minnesota and his purported talk to the assembled merchants of Davenport during World War I, in which the PSC president threatened to expose the local business community for unfair profits.

After obtaining them a second time on a tape recorder, Lerner observed that the two versions were "quite different," the first being recited in Davenport and the second in B.J.'s winter home in Sarasota, Florida five months later. Allowing for the inability of many people to accurately reconstruct events 30 and 35 years earlier, Lerner still concluded that B.J. ". . . related many things that never happened."¹¹

In fact, B.J.'s only "authorized biographer," a Palmer graduate by the name of Joseph Maynard, complained that The Developer declined to sit for any interviews even with this sanctioned believer. Again, he referred his would-be biographer to his published works and his lectures. The 1959 result was a collection of Palmer stories which became eligible for the school's mail list titles.¹²

There were, however, incisive observations by some of the thousands of chiropractors who graduated under B.J. during

his 55-year presidency at the Davenport "Fountain Head." Fred J. Gehl recalled that:

People who scorned him, learned to solicit him. People who questioned him, learned to support him. B.J., himself, admitted to having created, in many cases, an atmosphere which invited ridicule and disbelief, because he was inherently a flamboyant, uninhibited showman.¹³

B.J. was given to the outrageous almost from the beginning of his career as self-proclaimed educator, philosopher, leader and chief theoretician of the new alternative to orthodox medicine. Like many outstanding personalities who were short in stature, he was driven by ambition. Through an intense curiosity and an almost obsessive desire to utilize time he "calculated to best spend his years by exploiting time in every manner possible, to speed up growing of all to which he was dedicated."¹⁴

Through his publications—the monthly *Chiropractor* which he edited from 1906 to 1961 and the erratic *Fountain Head News*, which he published for 47 years—B.J. reached thousands of graduates, chiropractors and followers. Through his own printing plant, where busts of the literary greats overlooked the typesetters and compositors and caged singing birds competed with the din of the presses, B.J. directed a massive half century flow of words. Within the confines of this same plant the majority of the so-called "Green Books" were also printed.

Through these facilities, which he called "the prettiest little printing plant in America," B.J. also coordinated his other profitable publishing enterprises for the millions of tracts and pamphlets extolling the benefits of chiropractic for patients and practitioners in the field. A famous early riser, B.J. would be at his equally-famous typewriter with its built-in roll of paper, allowing its user to continue without the time loss and distractions of changing typing paper.

In short, within a decade of apparent impoverishment in a community where his father has participated in a cycle of mercantile and professional success and failure, B.J. Palmer had built an impressive instructional, organizational and publishing empire. The "Fountain Head" soon became known throughout the Midwest as a Mecca for the new intruder into the health care market, a place which not only propagated "The Big Idea," but which gave follow-up assistance to establish and maintain practices, as a source for literature and adjustment tables and as the place to send new students.

Where under The Founder the school had floundered, under the son—who quickly styled himself The Developer of Chiropractic—the Palmer School prospered. From a maximum of 24 students enrolled in the six months course of 1906, the PSC grew to a watershed of more than 3,100 in 1923, the year before the depression that set in at Davenport and

which was to last for fully two decades.¹⁵ The 18 month course, which had become standard by 1920, would itself survive for 38 years, withstanding the assaults of the "mixers" and the educational reformists led by John Nugent and other political and philosophical enemies of B.J. Indeed, for years B.J. would boast in his school catalogue and other organizational literature that the PSC "had graduated more than three quarters of all of the chiropractors practicing in the world."

Because he in effect encouraged controversy, B.J. would have approved of the assessment made by the *Iowan Magazine* a year before his 1961 death:

B.J. . . . is destined for history. But whether history sets him down as a great among greats, or a charlatan among charlatans, depends on who writes the history and the angle from which the man is viewed.¹⁶

Davenport and the Quad Cities of the Mississippi River, which forms the common border of Iowa and Illinois, also prospered along with B.J. and his institutions. From the handful of students in the converted mansion at the top of Brady Street hill, the school amassed large real estate holdings on both sides of the street and became the center in which literally thousands of staff, faculty and students would function for much of the 20s and again in a period of revival that has continued since the late 60s.

B.J. and his writings and later his pioneer venture into broadcast radio in 1922 and television in 1956 attracted students from virtually every country in the Western world. It would complement his 1925 travels around the world—at a time, his detractors would be quick to observe, when the profession had entered a critical survival period—and reflect the worldview that The Developer held about chiropractic, about culture and about life itself. Recalled one student:

His individuality reached into his mansion. . . as you look around and see a giant pipe organ on one wall, gnarled oak trees that appear to grow through the center of the living room, and brightly spotlighted—a life-sized wooden statue of a woman. In his home are curios from all over the world, the most famous a wishing Buddha appraised at \$250,000.¹⁷

B.J.'s influence in the chiropractic world translated to political importance in Iowa. His years as a chiropractic figure attracted presidents and would-be presidents to Davenport. Of the nine presidents of the United States during his incumbency, three—Coolidge, Hoover and Truman—visited with him at the Palmer Mansion. And in the early 1930s B.J. gave a radio announcing job at his Station WHO in Des Moines to an unknown by the name of Ronald Reagan.

He counted Elbert Hubbard, Edwin Markham, Luther Burbank, Mark Twain, Billy Sunday and others as friends, people who Bach described as "rugged individualists, men spurred on by ideals and by insatiable, probing minds."¹⁸ B.J., of course, emulated Hubbard, the Sage of East Aurora and

editor of the iconoclastic *Philistine*. He was invariably attired in a white linen suit, with a long, black, silk bow tie which would hang halfway to the waist in the fashion made popular by Hubbard and other such contemporaries as William Jennings Bryan and Twain.

Portraits of B.J. in this period were available to all alumni and faithful of the Fountain Head, as well as life-sized busts of the Maximum Leader "in various thought poses." One rendition of B.J. which appeared on a "Chiropractic Cigar Box," circa 1912, had him at the center of the world in a heroic Atlas-like pose, with Davenport at his feet. And for much of two decades, this was as much reality as symbolic perception from the Fountain Head.

The period of actual ascendancy of B.J. Palmer in and over organizational chiropractic could date from the decline of the Langworthy school and the death of the Founder in the 1912-13 period. With more assurance, though, it can be said that the decline of Palmer influence began with the neurocalometer debacle, the saga of chiropractic's own "black box," in the year 1924.

On a hot August night "under the tent" erected at the east end of the campus, B.J. delivered his address that had been billed in apocalyptic terms as "The Hour Has Struck." It was not B.J.'s finest hour, however, and led toward a gradual erosion of his support, then to a growing, widespread rejection of his leadership by "the field." Said one graduate of that event:

Who shall forget that torrid night under the tent when B.J. spoke. . . in that philippic he maligned chiropractic. . . said that many ugly things to the field. It was the hour that nearly rimracked and slaughtered and destroyed chiropractic.¹⁹

That may have been excessive anti-Palmer rhetoric of the time, but may have been equal to the B.J. "philippic," which included an account of a man pronounced medically dead who received neurocalometer analysis and an adjustment "and is still living" to a reminder that "I own the big rear end of this cow," which could be taken interchangeably as both the necrocalometer and chiropractic.²⁰ Whatever the interpretation, the Palmer sunset began. Within five years the PSC would be only a shadow of itself, sustaining a 90 percent loss of the student body. B.J.'s Universal Chiropractors Association, which had peaked at 3,500 members, declined to half that amount and he resigned as secretary-treasurer. State chiropractic associations which had sought him as speaker and bestowed awards upon him now passed resolutions of condemnation.

The Fountain Head of "Pure, Straight and Unadulterated" chiropractic went into virtual receivership under the control of the First National Bank of Davenport and the second floor auditorium of the D.D. Palmer Memorial Building was converted into a skating rink. The Developer, to some oblivious to the storm of controversy surrounding the necrocalometer

debate, left Davenport for a trip around the world, first class in every way and with the personal services of a retired English army major as tour manager.²¹

When he returned, the period described by Mabel Palmer as the "Golden Years of Chiropractic" had ended. The self confidence and prosperity that B.J. had transmitted to thousands of his graduates and which had embraced even the maligned mixers seemed to evaporate. The depression in chiropractic preceded the economic failure that overtook the country by several years, with basic science laws and medical assaults reducing the number of practicing D.C.s substantially. By 1932 only 1,400 were enrolled in all schools, less than half that of the PSC a decade earlier.²² The *Fountain Head News* was given to fits of B.J. melancholy, peppered with dire doomsday predictions for chiropractic.

Yet those who have explored the resurgence of chiropractic in the last quarter century are generally given to agree with Wardwell and others, who have concluded that B.J. was indeed "... the single most important influence in the growth, development and success of chiropractic for over fifty years."²³ This seeming contradiction may be best explained by B.J. Palmer himself, who was a contradiction for most of his public and private life.

Did his contributions outweigh his litany of error and embarrassment? Again, it may be "who writes the history and the angle from which the man is viewed." A catalogue of B.J.'s conflicts with fact, science and progress would be too lengthy for this study, yet for the would-be researcher there are 30 volumes under his name, popularly known as the "Green Books" and listed for this conference in 1986, as well as his articles and papers in more than 45 years in both of his publications, all awaiting comparative analysis.

His famous (or infamous) one-liners about the X-ray, hygiene, the various adjustments needed to cure typhoid fever and other communicable diseases are well known, especially by the readers of medical journals of this century. His disdain for recognized science was matched only by his contempt for the educational process, declaring in his 1908 PSC catalogue that "we do not waste valuable time in observing healthy and morbid tissue under the microscope... or the compounding of chemicals... or the analysis of secretions."²⁴

B.J. fought lengthening the 18-month course until four years before his death, and only after virtually every jurisdiction in North America had established the standard course for licensure. His UCA affiliates fought educational reform and he testified against it, and in the late 1950s fought against the two year preprofessional requirement, declaring that it "is veneer and polish... which will weaken the profession and (cause) a large reduction in the number of chiropractors."²⁵

Janse, Weiant, Firth and other chiropractic educators who advocated upgrading the schools were anathema to him, and Nugent, to many chiropractic's own Flexner, was a virtual Antichrist. He brooked no dissent in his school, his organiza-

tions or his many broadcasting and mercantile properties. To B.J. it would have been unthinkable to turn over the Palmer School to a nonprofit, professionally-controlled group. Monopoly and total control were characteristics of the Palmer experience.

Despite himself, however, B.J. was able to emerge from outright sectarianism and to a significant extent compromise with science and rational policies. To say that he acknowledged error would be difficult, for the royal Palmer "we" could only admit to the engulfing forces of accommodation to the mainline establishments that he had engaged in combat with for so many years. In fact, there is strong evidence that B.J. did provide an environment conducive to the biological and physical sciences at the Palmer School.

In virtually every decade of his presidency, he broke ground—many times with bitter criticism from his own fundamentalist followers. These included his establishment of the pioneer X-ray laboratories at the PSC only 13 years after Roentgen made his discovery; his osteological museum, praised as having "the best collection of human spines in existence" by an AMA inspection team in 1929; his cooperation with a German medical team in 1934 to secure the first wet specimen showing a transparency of the spinal canal in the upper cervical region and his comparative diagnostic laboratories at his B.J. Palmer Clinic, which received the most difficult of medically diagnosed diseases with a full medical and nursing staff.²⁶

B.J. encouraged research by Hender, Quigley and others at the Palmer-owned Clear View Sanitarium, a unique chiropractic facility for mental cases that survived the longer-established Forest Park Sanitarium in Davenport. His instrument for reading brain waves and their conduction through the spinal cord was a prototype of the EEG used in clinical diagnosis. Allopathy knew no quarter from B.J.'s typewriter or his broadcasting microphone, yet there was always a medical doctor on the Palmer staff.

The full Palmer story is yet to be told, without the veneer of an authorized biography or sanitized with the selected documents that might be made available. The bitter conflicts that engulfed the three generations Palmer had a decided impact upon the profession that they founded and shaped, but it becomes increasingly apparent as its Centennial approaches that the all-pervasive Palmer impact remains.

Neo-fundamentalists are still on the chiropractic landscape, purporting to keep alive the flame of what they say is the "Big Idea" of B.J. Their pronouncements invoke the passions and actions of a time when one undisputed leader held forth with "the truth," and like that leader they have invoked themselves as guardians of that "truth" rejected by the majority.

Ironically, through the twists of social and medical history, contemporary advocates of the philosophy that they maintain is "B.J. Palmer's," may in fact have become the prisoners

of late 20th century inhibitions. B.J., if he was anything, was irreverent. He delighted in tweaking the nose of orthodoxy, whatever its form. The True Believers of B.J.'s philosophy today are committed to orthodoxy, straight and "unadulterated."

"Inhibitions Starve History," B.J. titled one of his last pamphlets. In this tract he reflected some of the common sense writings that surface over those that occupied many of his other works. In it the Oracle of the Fountain Head made a tribute to his father that few in chiropractic today would dispute, and which on reflection may be B.J.'s own commentary of his life as well:

All (D.D. Palmer's) thinking was off the beaten path. He took the side roads, he wandered along into the jungle, cut down virgin forests and beat out a new road. The price he paid was to be alone, followed by few, shunned by many, misunderstood by most, fought on all sides by most of those who profited from his labors. But the sum total of that life led eventually to the great accomplishment that history will know him best for.²⁷

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